

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Alan Gould, *The Poets' Stairwell* (Black Pepper, 2015)

*The Poets' Stairwell* is a picaresque novel about Claude Boon and Henry Luck, English-born Australian poets who travel through Europe in search of their respective muse. There is a feeling of autobiography about this fictitious novel. That's perhaps due to the use of Gould's journals from his 1977 travels with his friend Kevin Hart,<sup>1</sup> which he drew on for Boon and Henry's itinerary as well as for some of the characterisation in the novel.

Henry Luck is a precocious confident scholar and voracious reader, focused on progressing his career as a poet. Claude Boon, who prefers to be known as Boon, is much less driven both in his career ambitions and his approach to life generally. It is Orientation Week and Boon has just concluded the welcome to the Arden Poetry Society when Henry approaches to introduce himself. Boon is preparing to graduate as Henry is preparing to begin studies. It is Henry who suggests that he and Boon travel together once he's graduated. Boon agrees to wait for Henry, and excited, they propose an agenda:

Yeats' grave in Ireland ... the room where Verlaine shot Rimbaud, Wordsworth's route through the Alps, stand on the beach where they burned Shelley's body. Dante's Florence, Byron's Venice, Plato's Athens. (43)

Henry's girlfriend, Rhee, is an equally bright and dedicated student. Boon likes her and finds her calmness attractive, but it is sharp-witted Eva Swart, the declared feminist follower of Marx and Lenin, who intrigues him. He has been fascinated by her ever since her dance at a protest rally, and thinks of her as a 'collision of fierce politics and loveliness' (23), Henry, on the other hand, describes her as having a 'soul-of-mud' (32). Interestingly, Rhee and Eva are friends, a challenge to Henry once he and Boon arrive to stay with Rhee in London before heading off on their grand adventure.

During a stopover in Bangkok, en route to London, they stroll about the hustle and bustle of this teeming city that both overwhelms and excites them with its energy. As usual, they discuss poets and poetry, and are deeply engaged as Boon starts a thought, Henry pounces and runs with it. Oblivious to their surroundings, they are an easy target for a trio of opportunistic, glamorous prostitutes: three very tiny, but tenacious women. The antics of the three beautiful women, Henry's 'I don't know what she wants from me' (50) and then later his 'No baht. No barter' (51), resolves his dilemma. The next morning when Boon encounters a woman and her python, his hysterical response becomes almost slapstick comedy (54-55). Underneath it all is the subtext of poverty in a city bustling with tourists, fair game for locals who seek to part the more gullible among them from some of their US dollars, if not then at least some baht.

In the manner of the picaresque, Gould has created a raft of characters; more of them are oddball than rogues and rascals. There's the anarchic Beamish, often found in Eva's company – both enjoy being punk. They plan political pranks to disrupt gatherings in order to make a statement; occasionally Beamish is over the top, almost dangerous. Eva tends to disappear before disaster strikes, leaving him to do his worst and take the consequences. Titus, an American, is a professional acrobat who uses his skills to exercise his rights under the Second Amendment. His subversive street

<sup>1</sup> Interview between Paul Stevens and Alan Gould featured in *The Chimaera*, March 2010  
<http://www.the-chimaera.com/March2010/Spotlight/Interview.html>.

performances are more a danger to him than to those who gather to watch. Willi the German truck driver who can hold his own with Henry in a discussion of Aquinas and his writings.

There is plenty about poetry, philosophy and history during the intense discussions between the poets and chance-met strangers. Henry as always, talks of poets and philosophers on a first-name basis, and continues to display his remarkable ability to choose the most appropriate poet and verses for the occasion. After such discussions, his insistence on providing Boon with a list of suggested reading matter annoys Boon, even as Boon acknowledges how apt the list may be. Henry's discourse on the Swiss Alps and the poetry of Wordsworth is one of those occasions for Boon.

Almost a sideline to the main action are the 'imagination' games Boon and Henry like to spring on one another in the belief it develops their poetic skill. I particularly enjoyed the instance that they strolled past a Venetian rail yard full of 'rusty old locomotives stacked three stories high'. Challenged to come up with an image, Boon promptly delivers 'a copulation of prehistoric snails' (144).

Henry's ordered, somewhat safe, approach to life, his dedication to poetry as he perceives it and his constant habit of reading in all sorts of situations, periodically stifles Boon, who takes off for a spot of spontaneous adventure on his own. Eventually Henry agrees to join him on the road, in spite of the opinion that it is undignified. It's in Venice that their luck runs out and they are forced to sleep among the Venetian gravestones. Oddly, it is Henry who holds firm that 'Venice provides' (147). Next day, Venice honours his faith through a chance encounter with two Yugoslavian women, a mother and daughter team working as translators at the poetry conference that has booked out the city's accommodation. Jelena declares a complete dislike for Australians, poets especially, even though Boon just rescued her from a gang of youths. However, her mother, Branca, joyfully proclaims them as 'authentic Australian poets' and decides to rescue them from another night among the graves and invites them to the conference as well. Branca has another agenda, and what occurs is a truly hilarious escapade leading to unexpected challenges for Henry's poetic career.

It is in Assisi that the 'poets' stairwell' makes an appearance, and, for me, this is a turning point in the friends journey (201-208). Martha, the plumber from small-town America, proves to be the most unexpected and most poignant character the men meet. Henry senses that, like him, Martha is searching for direction in her life. As he patiently seeks to provide an explanation of 'reality' for Martha (256), another side to Henry is revealed.

This very funny book is Claude Boon's story, and through his narrative and observations the reader is able to know Henry Luck. This book is about friendship: its beginnings, its challenges, and how it can uplift or put down, cause jealousy and hurt through blissful unawareness more than deliberation much of the time. It is an excellent representation of the claustrophobia that close proximity as travelling companions over several months can cause.

**Kay Hart**